Background Women’s Suffrage Movement

(*adapted from: The Seneca Falls Convention: Teaching about the Rights of Women and the Heritage of the Declaration of Independence by Elizabeth R. Osborn)*

Different groups at different times have turned to founding documents of the United States to meet their needs and to declare their entitlement to the promises of the Revolution of 1776.  At Seneca Falls, New York in the summer of 1848, a group of American men and women met to discuss the legal limitations imposed on women during this period.  Their consciousness of those limitations had been raised by their participation in the anti-slavery movement; eventually they used the language and structure of the Declaration of Independence to stake their claim to the rights they felt women were entitled to as American citizens.

Americans, especially women, formed and joined reform societies.  Inspired by the message of the Second Great Awakening  (a religious movement that emphasized man's potential and forgiveness of sin) and the Transcendentalist message of man's innate goodness, reformers joined together in organizations aimed at improving life in America.

The Seneca Falls convention is a part of this larger period of social reform movements, a time when concern about the rights of various groups percolated to the surface. The triggering incident was a direct result of participation in anti-slavery organizations by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott.  Anti-slavery societies proliferated in the Northeast region of the United States and in some parts of what today we call the Midwest.  Many of these organizations had female members.

In 1840 the World Anti-Slavery Convention met in London; some of the American groups elected women as their representatives to this meeting.  Once in London, after a lengthy debate, the female representatives were denied their rightful seats and consigned to the balcony.  It was at this meeting, while sitting in the balcony and walking through the streets of London, that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott met.  Eight years later Stanton and Mott called a convention to discuss women's rights

On July 14, 1848, the *Seneca County Courier* announced that on the following Wednesday and Thursday a "convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women" would be held.  The Convention issued a document titled the Declaration of Sentiments, a statement written by Stanton and modeled on the Declaration of Independence.

In adapting the Declaration of Independence, Stanton replaced "King George" with "all men" as the agent of women's oppressed condition and compiled a suitable list of grievances, just as the colonists did in the Declaration of Independence.  These grievances reflected the severe limitations on women's legal rights in America at this time: women could not vote; they could not participate in the creation of laws that they had to obey; their property was taxed; and a married woman's property and wages legally belonged to her husband.  Further, in the relatively unusual case of a divorce, custody of children was virtually automatically awarded to the father; access to the professions and higher education generally was closed to women; and most churches barred women from participating publicly in the ministry or other positions of authority.

Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments proclaimed that "all men and women were created equal" and that the undersigned would employ all methods at their disposal to right these wrongs.